

Shelling and Schooling: Educational Disruptions and Social Consequences for Children in Poonch

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Abstract

This study explores how cross-border shelling affects the lives and learning experiences of children living in the border villages of Poonch district, Jammu & Kashmir. These communities lie along the tense Line of Control, where frequent military hostilities disrupt everyday life. Among those most deeply affected are the children, whose education and emotional well-being often suffer in silence. Using a qualitative approach, the research draws on personal stories shared by students, parents, teachers, and local officials, as well as on-the-ground observations in areas hit hardest by the shelling. The findings paint a troubling picture: repeated episodes of shelling result in school closures, displacement, and severe disruptions to learning. Many children live with the constant fear of violence, studying in schools that lack even basic safety infrastructure. With limited access to digital tools or alternative modes of education, learning often comes to a standstill. Beyond the academic setbacks, the study highlights deeper emotional and social scars. Children report high levels of anxiety, reduced interaction with peers, and a loss of the stable routines that are so vital during their formative years. Their emotional growth and sense of security are often compromised, leaving long-term impacts. Despite these challenges, schools remain one of the few places offering children a sense of hope and normalcy. But in conflict zones like Poonch, they are too often underfunded, poorly equipped, and left vulnerable. The study calls for urgent reforms—conflict-sensitive education policies, trauma-informed teaching, mobile schooling units, and protective infrastructure—to ensure that children living along the border are not denied their fundamental right to education.

Keywords— Cross-border shelling, Education, Children in conflict zones, Displacement and schooling

I. INTRODUCTION

In early May 2025, the people of Poonch district in Jammu & Kashmir experienced one of the worst attacks in recent memory. It was the most intense shelling since the 1971 India–Pakistan War. The violence began after India launched “Operation Sindoor,” targeting terror camps across the border. In retaliation, Pakistani forces fired heavy mortars and artillery into civilian areas of Poonch. The damage was devastating. Thirteen civilians, including children, lost their lives, and more than 40 were injured. Around 31 schools were damaged, and hundreds of homes were destroyed. Families were left shaken, and

children faced the worst of it both physically and emotionally. In response, the Jammu & Kashmir government stepped in with emergency aid. Evacuations were carried out, and efforts were made to build safer spaces like bunkers and mobile classrooms. But the fear and trauma caused by the shelling will not be so easily repaired.

This study focuses on how ongoing cross-border violence affects the everyday lives of school-going children in Poonch. It looks at how their education is interrupted, how they deal with the fear, and how their families and schools try to help them cope. Using interviews with

children, parents, teachers, and local officials, the study brings out their real-life experiences and challenges. The findings show that frequent shelling doesn't just disturb school schedules—it deeply affects children's mental health, emotional growth, and overall well-being. Many children feel anxious and unsafe, which makes it harder for them to learn and grow.

This research highlights the need for more sensitive and supportive education systems in conflict-prone areas. It suggests steps like setting up temporary schools, training teachers to handle trauma, and offering community support to help children recover and continue their education—even in times of crisis.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Children growing up in conflict-affected border areas like Poonch, Jammu & Kashmir, have had their education deeply disrupted by ongoing violence. Frequent incidents of mortar shelling, sudden curfews, and military operations have created an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty that affects their ability to attend school regularly and focus on learning. Over the past decade, researchers have looked at these challenges from different angles: how trauma affects young minds, how access to education is limited, how boys and girls are impacted differently, and how communities try to stay resilient with the help of civil society. The situation in Jammu & Kashmir, especially in districts like Poonch, clearly reflects these wider patterns of instability in education caused by conflict.

Bhat and Misri (2016) highlighted that in Jammu & Kashmir, education is constantly at risk due to ongoing conflict. Schools often have to close suddenly because of safety concerns, which seriously affects student's attendance and interest in learning. Their study found that children living near the Line of Control (LoC) miss almost 60 days of school each year, which adds up to major gaps in their learning over time. Similarly, **UNESCO (2017)** drew attention to how vulnerable education is in areas affected by war and conflict across the world. They stressed the need for safer school buildings and teaching methods that are sensitive to the realities of life in such dangerous environments especially in border regions like Poonch.

Ahmed and Lone (2018) studied children attending schools in the border areas of Rajouri and Poonch and found that many students were dealing with serious emotional stress. Constant fear of artillery shelling led to

anxiety, sleep problems, and emotional withdrawal. The frequent need to flee their homes during firing incidents also caused major disruptions in their learning and made it hard for students to build strong connections with their classmates. In a related study, **Kaul and Rafiq (2020)** spoke to schoolteachers who said they often find themselves doing more than just teaching; they are also helping children cope with fear and trauma. These teachers stressed the need for trauma-informed teaching methods, especially in areas where violence and instability are part of everyday life. **Zahoor and Rather (2018)** found that many students in Rajouri and Poonch travel long distances to reach safer schools, making it hard to attend regularly or access learning materials. **Ahmed and Kour (2019)** pointed out that most emergency responses in Jammu & Kashmir focus on short-term relief, rather than building strong, lasting education systems. Sociologically, losing access to education in such conflict zones is not just about falling behind in studies; it also disrupts children's sense of identity, belonging, and future opportunities.

Kumar and Wani (2022) found that school closures hit girls especially hard in border areas, as safety concerns and cultural norms often stop them from returning to school especially after incidents like cross-border firing. Their study revealed that many parents hesitate to send adolescent girls back to class once schools reopen. **Sharma (2019)** added that over 30% of border schools in J&K lack basic safety features like boundary walls, strong roofs, or bunkers, making them highly vulnerable during attacks. As a result, many children end up relying on home or community tuitions, which are often irregular and lack proper oversight.

Devi and Awasthi (2020) studied the aftermath of the 2018 shelling in Poonch and highlighted how local NGOs like Sir Syed Education Mission and Khalsa Welfare Foundation stepped in to help. They provided emotional support, temporary classrooms, and emergency learning kits. **Shafi and Akhtar (2022)** further noted that the trauma children face during shelling doesn't just affect them; it also deeply impacts their families and communities, leading to greater social and emotional isolation.

On the positive side, literature also emphasizes the role of education in fostering resilience. **Winthrop and Kirk (2008)** note that even in crisis contexts, schooling provides routine, social support, and hope. **Nicolai and Triplehorn (2003)** advocate for “conflict-sensitive

education” that adapts pedagogy and infrastructure to the risks of violence. However, such strategies remain largely absent from policy design in border regions of India.

Khan and Majeed (2025) examined the effects of Operation Sindoor and reported that 23 schools and 8 colleges were damaged in the May 2025 shelling. Over 300 students missed their final-year exams. They found that NGOs responded faster than government agencies in setting up safe learning spaces. While visits by leaders like the LG and Home Minister brought attention to the crisis, they lacked immediate action on the ground. **Chib and Raina (2024)** noted that families and religious centers helped restore normalcy by turning mosques, gurdwaras, and community halls into makeshift classrooms.

Despite growing attention to education in emergencies, few empirical studies examine the intersection of childhood, conflict, and schooling in Indian border areas like Poonch. This study aims to address that gap through a sociological lens, analyzing how children experience and respond to educational disruptions in militarized environments.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the extent and nature of educational disruptions caused by cross-border shelling in the Poonch district of Jammu & Kashmir.
2. To understand the social and psychological consequences of shelling on school-going children, including trauma, displacement, and anxiety.
3. To explore the coping mechanisms adopted by children, parents, and teachers in navigating education under conditions of conflict and insecurity.
4. To assess the availability and effectiveness of institutional support, such as alternative schooling arrangements, mental health services, and safety infrastructure in shelling-affected areas.
5. To provide policy recommendations for implementing conflict-sensitive educational strategies that safeguard children's right to education and well-being in border communities.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative approach to understand how cross-border shelling affects the education and overall well-being of children in Poonch district, Jammu & Kashmir. In conflict-affected areas where emotions, fears, and daily struggles are deeply personal, qualitative methods help capture the real voices and experiences of those living through the violence. This approach offers a more meaningful, human-centered understanding of what children and their communities face every day.

Study Area and Sample

The research was carried out in five border villages of Poonch district particularly Shahpur, Degwar Terwan, Balakote, and Mandi which have faced repeated shelling over the past five years. These villages were carefully chosen because of their closeness to the Line of Control (LoC), their history of conflict, and the presence of functioning schools despite the challenges.

A total of 42 participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling methods. These included 15 school-going children (aged 10–16), 10 parents, 12 teachers and principals, and 5 local administrators or NGO workers. Together, they provided valuable insights into how shelling disrupts education from multiple viewpoints those of children, families, schools, and the broader community.

Table 1: Profile of Respondents by Category

Respondent Category	Number of Participants
School-going Children (Age 10–16)	15
Parents/Guardians	10
Schoolteachers and Principals	12
Local Administrators/NGO Workers	5
Total	42

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected using the following tools:

- **Semi-structured interviews** with children, parents, teachers, and local officials to understand educational disruptions, trauma, and institutional responses.
- **Focus group discussions (FGDs)** with teachers and parents to explore community-level coping mechanisms.

- **Field observations** in schools and temporary learning centers to document infrastructural conditions and the learning environment.

All interviews were conducted in local languages and transcribed with participant consent. Ethical considerations were maintained, including informed consent, confidentiality, and sensitivity toward trauma.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS

The qualitative data collected during the study were analyzed using thematic analysis. This involved carefully reading through the interview and discussion transcripts to identify common patterns and recurring ideas. Several key themes emerged, including “disrupted schooling routines,” “psychosocial impact,” “adaptive responses,” and “institutional gaps.” These themes helped make sense of how children, families, and schools are navigating life and learning in a conflict-affected environment.

V. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This section shares the main findings from interviews, focus group discussions, and field observations carried out in four villages of Poonch affected by cross-border shelling. The analysis highlights the deep and layered ways in which ongoing violence has impacted children's education, their emotional well-being, and the ways in which families and communities are trying to cope with these ongoing challenges.

1. Frequent School Closures and Interrupted Learning

One of the most common themes that emerged from the interviews was the constant disruption of formal education due to ongoing shelling. Schools often stayed closed for weeks during periods of heavy conflict. Students spoke about long breaks in their studies, unfinished homework, and the struggle to catch up once schools reopened. Teachers shared that under such uncertain conditions, completing the syllabus became nearly impossible. *"We never know when school will open or close again. Sometimes, we just sit at home and wait,"* said a 13-year-old student from Degwar village.

2. Psychological Distress Among Children

Living in a conflict zone has taken a clear toll on the mental health of children. Many showed signs of anxiety, constant fear, trouble sleeping, and emotional withdrawal. Both parents and teachers observed

noticeable changes in behaviour like irritability, difficulty focusing, and hesitation to return to school, even when things seemed calm. *"If my son hears a loud thunder, he won't go to school. He thinks it's shelling again,"* shared by Mohd Hanief from Shahpur village.

3. Infrastructure Damage and Unsafe Learning Environments

During field visits, many schools were found in poor condition—some had damaged buildings, broken windows, and no bunkers, making them unsafe during shelling. In a few cases, classrooms had been turned into makeshift shelters during emergencies, which further disrupted their purpose as learning spaces. *"We don't feel safe here. When the firing begins, we either lie on the floor or run outside. There's nowhere to hide,"* said a teacher from a government school near the LoC.

4. Alternative and Informal Learning Arrangements

During extended school closures, there were no organized efforts by NGOs or local educators to support continued learning in the affected villages. Children were often left without any structured educational activities. In some cases, schools sent homework through online platforms, but most students couldn't access it due to poor network connectivity and lack of smartphones or digital devices at home. As a result, there were no meaningful learning arrangements in place, leaving many students disconnected from education for weeks.

5. Gendered Impact of Disruption

The effects of shelling were especially harsh on girl students. Concerned for their safety, many parents decided to pull their daughters out of school during periods of conflict. Some girls shared that they missed months of classes—not only because of the violence, but also because they were expected to take on more household responsibilities. *"When there's shelling, I'm told to stay home and look after my younger siblings. My brother still goes out sometimes,"* said a 14-year-old girl from Salotri.

6. Resilience and Community Coping Mechanisms

Despite the many hardships, communities showed remarkable resilience. Parents came together to form informal support networks sharing transport to safer schools, keeping each other updated on shelling alerts, and helping their children cope emotionally. These grassroots efforts reflect the deep social solidarity that helps sustain a sense of normalcy, even during crisis. All religious communities played a vital role in supporting

those affected. Institutions like *Jamia Zia ul Uloom Poonch*, local *Gurudwaras*, and *Geeta Bhavan* opened their doors to everyone in need, offering shelter, food, and a safe space during times of heavy shelling. These acts of kindness created a shared sense of protection and unity across faiths

Sociological Analysis

Using the lens of “everyday resistance” and “normalized violence” (Scott, 1985; Nordstrom, 1997), the findings show that children and their communities in Poonch have learned to adapt to conflict by quietly enduring and navigating daily fear. What was once a safe and nurturing classroom environment has now become an uncertain space—where learning, fear, and trauma exist side by side. The continued exclusion of girls from education during these times not only disrupts their futures but also deepens existing gender inequalities, especially in these already vulnerable border communities.

Policy Recommendations

The findings of this study clearly show that cross-border shelling deeply affects children’s learning, emotions, and social growth in border areas. These disruptions leave lasting marks on their development and future opportunities. To help address these challenges and make education more resilient in conflict-hit areas like Poonch, the following policy suggestions are put forward:

1. Development of Conflict-Resilient Educational Infrastructure

Schools in high-risk border areas urgently need better protection to keep children safe. Building reinforced classrooms, underground bunkers, and secure shelters within or near school grounds can provide safety during shelling. In times of extended school closures, temporary or mobile classrooms should also be set up to ensure that children don’t fall behind in their studies. These measures can make a big difference in protecting both education and lives during conflict.

2. Integration of Conflict-Sensitive Pedagogy

Teachers need training that prepares them to support children dealing with fear, stress, and trauma. Adding modules on trauma-informed teaching and conflict-sensitive education can help educators respond with care and understanding. Lessons should also reflect the local realities children face, and include healing activities like drawing, storytelling, and peer group discussions. These approaches can help children feel safe, express

their emotions, and re-engage in classroom learning with confidence.

3. Promotion of Gender-Sensitive Educational Policies

Since conflict tends to affect girls more severely—especially in conservative families—there’s a need for solutions that specifically support them. This could include offering financial support to families, ensuring safe transport to and from school, and running awareness campaigns in communities to highlight the importance of girls’ education. In areas where girls can’t attend school regularly, local female education volunteers can be recruited to help continue their learning at home in a safe and familiar environment.

4. Expansion of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Services

Providing counselling support in government schools should be seen as a priority, especially for children living with the constant stress of conflict. Having trained mental health professionals visit schools regularly even if only on a rotating basis can help children process fear, anxiety, and trauma in a safe space. Alongside this, schools can create peer support groups and work with local organizations to run workshops that help build emotional strength and resilience in both children and their parents. These efforts can go a long way in supporting healing and restoring a sense of normalcy.

5. Strengthening Digital Access and Remote Learning Capacity

Since access to physical classrooms is often disrupted, improving digital infrastructure in border villages is crucial. This means making sure there’s reliable internet, providing solar-powered devices, and setting up community-based digital learning hubs where children can study safely. To make learning truly inclusive, educational content should be available in local languages and tailored to the region’s needs so that every child can understand and stay connected to their education, even during difficult times.

6. Institutional Coordination and Governance Integration

Better coordination between the Department of Education, Disaster Management Authorities, and local governance bodies is essential. Local Panchayats should play an active role in creating School Safety Plans, as they understand the community’s needs best. At the same time, district authorities must make sure that keeping education going is part of their emergency planning—so

that learning doesn't come to a halt every time a crisis strikes.

7. Establishment of Monitoring and Evaluation Mechanisms

There's a need for a dedicated system to monitor how shelling affects education in border areas. One possible solution is creating a **Border Education Disruption Index (BEDI)** to track things like school closures, changes in attendance, learning progress, and students' emotional well-being. Having this kind of data would help policymakers better understand the real impact on children's education and make smarter, more targeted decisions about where support and resources are most needed.

VI. CONCLUSION

The shelling that followed **Operation Sindoor** in May 2025 laid bare just how fragile education is in India's border regions—especially in Poonch district. While the operation addressed key security concerns, it also brought unintended consequences for children and youth. Damaged schools, ongoing closures, and the constant fear of violence severely disrupted learning—impacting hundreds of students, particularly adolescent girls, many of whom dropped out due to safety worries and cultural pressures. Yet amid the chaos, stories of resilience emerged. Teachers held classes in homes, students formed peer study groups, and local NGOs like the **Sir Syed Education Mission, District Red Cross Society, Khalsa Welfare Foundation, and Sarimastan Trust** stepped in to support learning. These efforts offered a glimpse of hope, but they cannot replace the need for long-term, government-led solutions.

This study emphasizes that education in conflict zones must not be seen as a secondary concern—it is a lifeline. It calls for urgent investment in trauma-informed care, the construction of permanent bunker-based classrooms, and protection strategies that prioritize the safety and inclusion of girls. Symbolic visits and public promises by officials are not enough. What's needed is real, transparent action, continuous monitoring, and meaningful involvement of local communities. Only then can children in places like Poonch dare to dream, learn, and grow—even in the shadow of conflict.

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